

"Nonviolence is a Weapon of the Strong": The YWCA of India's Response to the Situation in Palestine



Leila Passah

"Nonviolence is a Weapon of the Strong" – Mahatma Gandhi

This powerful quote comes to mind when we reflect on the journey of thousands of Palestinians who have faced oppression, humiliation and all forms of injustice under the Israeli occupation, the thousands of women and girls who also face violence and live and work in a culture of fear and where children grow in an environment of terror and insecurity. This society continues to struggle for an independent state by forging ahead with faith, hope and dignity, fighting for a just cause.

The Kairos Palestine Document – A Moment of Truth, a document produced by a group of Palestinian Christians, captures the reality on the ground and continues to express hope in the midst of hopelessness. When one reads the document, one is compelled to draw closer to the human tragedy of a people who do not have a solid ground or a state to call their own.

How should we react?

We in India cannot afford not to react, as we were one of the early strong nations, who were so proud to stand by the Palestinian cause, reflecting uncompromising foreign policies that clearly stood for Peace and Justice. But today we are no longer able to boast of the same. Instead, we hang our heads in shame because of the compromises we have made, including being one of the largest importers of arms from Israel. Is this due to effects of globalization, or the urgency to compete with other nations, in the race for being an economic giant? But at what cost should we compromise? We need to be seen as a giant fighting for human rights of all peoples, especially women and children who often become the prime victims of violence and terror. We need to urge all countries, especially from the South, to lobby with their respective governments, to push for justice, freedom and sustained peace in Palestine.

What about the YWCA response?

The YWCA of India has joined hands with other National Ecumenical movements and the National Council of Churches, to develop advocacy based projects and increase people's awareness and involvement with the struggles of the Palestinians through joint programs on advocacy and community action.

For instance, we have held candle light vigils in the capital city during Palm Sunday, to express our solidarity with the Palestinian Christians who were denied their basic rights to worship in holy places in Jerusalem. A silent expression of protest and later awareness to the public about the plight of the Palestinians was presented by the Palestinian Ambassador. We also joined in joint ecumenical worship services around the country, to pray for Peace in Israel-Palestine during a whole month in June. Panel discussion and dialogue around peace, education, and Indian ecumenical response to the question of Palestine, was filmed and uploaded onto YouTube, and later screened on the wall of Jerusalem during the World Week for Peace organized by the WCC.

ISEN (The India Solidarity Ecumenical Network) of which the YWCA of India is co-convenor, is planning on more advocacy initiatives like developing a strategy for BDS, planning a visit to Palestine for a group inclusive of church leaders, women, young people, Dalits and Tribals to study the situation and encounter with the local communities, and return to India as advocates for social change and justice. As part of an advocacy strategy, we are also planning a visit of a Palestinian theologian, who will train with theological colleges and ecumenical movements like the YWCA and the Student Christian Movement, through seminars and workshops on issues affecting Palestinians, and explore dialogue on challenges that confront India like fascism, and increasing fundamentalism that leaves little room for tolerance and communal harmony.

India and Palestine can find common creative ways to address issues that threaten human rights of peoples, especially those of the Palestinians. We are committed to work with you and are in solidarity, as you;

- fight for your freedom from oppression and occupation
- fight against increasing settlements that ravage your land and natural resources
- take risks to resist and protest the daily humiliation faced at military check points
- fight for freedom of access to holy places
- fight for the release of thousands of innocent people who are imprisoned daily
- fight against Israeli disregard for International law and resolutions

It is time once again, to hear the voices of as many nations and people, who can put an end to such forms of illegal occupation, violence, human rights violations, by putting pressure on every government to take a position to support the legitimate demands of the Palestinian people. When will the international community take up the responsibility to ensure that justice will be realised and that Palestine will have its free independent state, to re-build and reconstruct a new nation?

They have waited, and waited patiently and with dignity. It is our time as part of the international community to respond with courage and bold initiatives to support their cause for just peace.

"It was a time when the unthinkable became the thinkable and the impossible really happened" – Arundhati Roy (Indian woman author)